

icy air

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icy air

by [Drhair76](#)

Summary

"Tommy," Eret asks on Thursday as Tommy, well refreshed and ready to try those spins again, laces up his skates. "What would you think about having a skating partner?"

Tommy's heart drops.

or, Tommy, still settling into his partnership with his new coach, feels like he doesn't need to address the fact that he can't breathe when he skates. At least, not until said coach takes on a new student named Olive.

Notes

note: every abused person (kids mostly) have a moment when they think they're just like their abuser :/

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Tommy has his first asthma attack a week before qualifications.

He doesn't know that's what it is, however. When he's bent over, knees on the ice, his chest pressing in, in, in, he thinks – *okay, okay, you've got three minutes to freak out before coach comes*. He spends two of those three minutes panting and gasping and trembling. Then he spends thirty seconds of his remaining minute picking himself up off the ice by sheer force of will.

By the time his coach comes in, his expression is smooth, and it doesn't matter that Tommy's lungs are burning, or that his toes are tingling, or that he's feeling lightheaded just standing here – no, what matters is that Tommy is standing. And if he's standing then he can move, and if he can move, then he can skate.

And if he can skate, well – there's nothing more after that.

He manages to make it through that week, and then qualifications, and then the grueling months after that. He has mini-breakdowns scattered throughout, each one worse than the last. (And that's what he calls them, because the way his lungs refuse to inflate and the way his throat refuses to relax can only be akin to a car unwilling to start, a machine unwilling to work, a trophy that's –)

“Honey, are you sure you’re alright?” His mother asks, when Tommy, who’s packing up his stuff so his room can be converted into a guest bed while he’s away, gets winded and nearly chokes on the swirling dust. “You’ve been coughing a lot lately. If you’re sick, you really should let your coach know –”

“No!” Tommy interrupts. His mother blinks, startled. Tommy flushes. Quieter, he goes, “no, I’m okay. I just – it’s my throat. I think there’s something caught in it. And the dust doesn’t help. I’m okay.”

His mother frowns, unsure. But at this point, Tommy’s perfected smiling under scrutiny. Unfortunately, his mother couldn’t tell he was suffering three months ago when he would bury himself under his covers and sob after practices. She couldn’t tell when he would press himself into their laundry room and shake apart after one single conference call with his coach. She couldn’t tell when he would drift through the house in a daze before morning practice, bypassing the breakfast table entirely. She couldn’t ever tell, so Tommy pretty much expects it when she makes a small, uncertain noise and turns away.

When she’s out of sight, Tommy bends in half, trying to pull in any air at all.

Get up, Simons, he thinks, frantic, *get up, get up.*

He, as he always does, gets up.

He doesn’t have an asthma attack during the olympics.

Or, he doesn't think he does. For the first half of it, he feels like he can't breathe already. Every light is too bright, every corner has something lurking behind it, every eye that lands on him, presses in. He's holding his breath, really. On the plane ride there, as they walk in, the first time he sees the practice rink. It's hard to lose something you've never had, and so Tommy, who had his breath stolen long before being placed on the world stage, doesn't notice when it goes.

He very vividly remembers when it returns, though.

Tommy meets Wilbur Soot, and he takes his first full breath in what feels like years.

He rests in Wilbur's arms, surrounded by his teammates, and swallows lungfuls of untampered air. Something that was blocking his throat comes loose, and he feels free and hopeful for the first time in forever.

"Are you sure everything is alright?" Ponk asks once when checking him out. "There's nothing else I should check over? Nothing else that's bothering you?"

Techno is by my side, Tommy thinks, a bit foolishly, *nothing could hurt me*.

He doesn't think about the way his own body protests violently against him. He doesn't think about how sometimes the pieces inside of him falter and shut down, leaving him flailing. He doesn't think about just how dangerous it is to keep going the way he does with what little he has.

Tommy leaves the medical center and the Olympics carrying this secret with him – it's fine, he presumes. He'll be alright. He'll push through it, just as he always does. It might not even ever come up again.

It, as most things that are pushed to the side do, comes back up again. And it comes back up *viciously*.

"Can you try it again for me, please?"

Tommy *loves* Eret.

He never thought that he could think that or feel anything other than fear and apprehension around a coach before, but it's true. Eret is a dream come true, and even with a rocky first couple of months, Tommy feels like now that they're getting the hang of it, he can say it safely without the fear that it will blow up in his face.

"Yeah," Tommy says easily, ignoring the slight hitch in his chest to pull himself back around in a tight circle. He doesn't ignore it because he is afraid not to do what he's told, no, he ignores it because seeing Eret be proud of him is just so rewarding.

He tucks his limbs in tight and spins. The world becomes a comfortable blur around him, and it *should* be fine, but when he pulls his arms over his head, he feels like he's pulling his lungs

too. He's pulling at them, and they're not responding, and he's trying to breathe, but he can't, and he's *still spinning*, and Eret is saying something, but –

Tommy falls. Just buckles and drops, and thank god it's on his ass, because his vision was too spotty to keep his own head from hitting the ice.

"Tommy!" Eret gasps, dropping down to his knees, frantic. "Tommy, are you alright? Does anything hurt?"

Tommy tries to talk and can't – he wheezes, the coughs, then forces out, "*no*," before gasping again.

"Okay, okay, calm down," Eret says. A hand touches Tommy's back, rubbing. "You're alright. You're okay. You're panicking," he concludes. "Can you try following my breathing? In for four, hold for four, and out for four – remember our square breathing?"

Tommy clutches at Eret's hand and tries to count. He sounds *awful* – little gasps and wheezes rattling from his throat, like he's got water blocking all his airways. It feels like he's swallowed dry ice with the way that his insides are freezing up and burning all at once.

Please, he thinks, please let me breathe.

Eventually, with Eret guiding him back to lay on the ice and advising him to have his hands crossed over his head, Tommy feels his chest open up and let him take quick sharp breaths of clean icy air.

"That was scary," Eret says – yet another thing Tommy loves about him. He plainly states his own emotions, confessing fear and shock and awe whenever they come around. Tommy's coach never did that. The only time Tommy knew that man was feeling something was when it was anger or disappointment. "Are you okay? I mean, silly question – do you feel *better*?"

Tommy nods, eyes lidded. After his mini-breakdowns he always feels exhausted. Like he needs to curl up someplace warm. He doesn't want to keep skating right now.

"Can I," Tommy stops to take a breath, "can I have a break please?"

Eret's gaze softens. "I was going to yank you off the ice myself if you didn't ask," he admits. "I'm proud of you *for* asking, though, I know that was hard." Tommy nods, shuffling forward, letting his eyes slide shut and leaning against Eret's warm purple sweater. "Practice for today is canceled. You should rest. Relax. We can come back on Thursday if you're feeling alright."

Tommy, not thinking anything of it, nods.

He regrets not thinking anything of it.

"Tommy," Eret asks on Thursday as Tommy - well refreshed and ready to try those spins again - laces up his skates. "What would you think about having a skating partner?"

Tommy's heart drops.

Almost instantly, he's pushed backwards into a memory.

Tommy is uncomfortable.

Nothing new, not really. Most of the days of his life are spent under a giant glass dome, simultaneously isolated and crowded around. Both looked at and left alone. He's the studied specimen and the circus animal. Expected to perform and lay perfectly still at the same time – always a lose-lose.

"Tommy," his coach says suddenly, jolting Tommy out of his thoughts, "is a – well, to be nice, a piece of work." He laughs neatly and the interviewer across from him laughs along. The smile pasted on Tommy's face wavers ever-so-slightly. Oh. No, they weren't addressing him. It's not his turn to talk.

He's been sitting here for this interview for a half an hour now, just waiting for his cue. He hasn't done anything but smile since he introduced himself to the camera, and he's starting to get the sinking feeling that he won't be asked to do anything more. His participation in his future isn't required – the ball will keep rolling whether he wants it to or not.

"Oh really?" The interviewer goes, eyes briefly cutting over to Tommy before being drawn back to his coach. "How so?"

"It's a chore to get him to practice," his coach says lightly. "He's always running late or missing something. Honestly, I joke that he would show up late to a gold medal if it had a timetable."

The interviewer and his coach laugh and Tommy wants to sink into his chair in hot embarrassment. But, when his coach looks over at him, still laughing, Tommy laughs too. It's funny, he thinks, the way the truth gets twisted.

He was late to their last practice, but not because he was busy – or, well, he was busy. Busy gasping and wheezing through the night. His window was left open, and he guesses the air was not nice for his troubled lungs, because in the morning, simple movements were a chore. Every couple of steps he had to stop and heave, his head swimming. He stumbled into practice ten minutes late for being thirty minutes early, and was still clumsily tying his skates when his coach walked in.

He didn't know not being able to breathe made him a piece of work.

"I mean, teenagers, right?" The interviewer asks. His tone is very you are so brave for dealing with him, and it makes Tommy wish he were allowed to cry. "What can you do with them?"

"Just hope that one day it all clicks," his coach sighs and Tommy melts back into his mind, waiting for his next cue. He does hear one snatch before he tunes it out, and that's – "I hope it clicks soon before I have to find another, more disciplined skater to replace him. What a waste of time that would be, am I right?"

Tommy desperately doesn't want to be a waste of time. Especially not to Eret, who's been so *kind*, and *giving*, and *gentle*. Tommy wants to be *good*. Tommy, horribly, wants nothing more than to be *kept*.

"A skating partner?" He asks, his mouth feeling disconnected from his body. "What – what does that mean? I skate singles."

"I know," Eret smiles, and it's the smile that normally eases every hidden anxiety of Tommy's, but this time, that tightness in Tommy's stomach only gets tighter. "But lots of skating coaches take on more than one student at a time, and I think that I've found someone who's willing to learn. Nothing would change between the two of us, I would just add another person to our practices."

"Oh," Tommy goes, and wishes that he didn't want to break down into tears. "That sounds... nice."

Eret's smile dims slightly. "Tommy, remember what I said: if something makes you uncomfortable..."

"I can tell you," Tommy finishes, swinging his legs and standing on his tied skates. He doesn't look at Eret. "It's okay. A skating partner really does sound nice. I've never had one before. Except...Eryn, I guess."

Eret's smile returns. Tommy tries not to feel guilty for lying. "See? That's what I was thinking too. And I would get you back with Eryn, but you know that Boomer is his coach and will be until Eryn decides differently. Thankfully, I found a skater that's looking for a transfer – their name is Olive, and they have a lot of potential, and they're very, very excited to skate with you."

"That sounds fun," Tommy lies. His smile hurts his face. His lungs burn. He hesitates, then, "should we start, or –"

Eret seems disheartened, and like he wants to keep talking it through – because that's what they do, him and Tommy, talk things through so there are no misunderstandings – but he nods and finishes tying up his skate. "Of course. We've got some stuff to catch up on, don't we?"

It's a lighthearted statement, but Tommy flinches anyway.

What a waste of time that would be.

Tommy, internally, can't help but to hate Eret, hate Olive, and most of all, hate himself.

The worst part of it all is that Olive is nice.

They come to their first joint practice ten minutes early in a faded green hoodie and a gym bag covered in press-on patch ghosts. They seem just a tad frazzled, as if they just woke up, but when their eyes land on Tommy, who's already laced up and nervously skating back and forth, they beam.

"Hi!" Olive chirps, putting their gym bag down. "I brought coffee!"

Tommy blinks. He only just registered the cardboard cup holder in their hands with the three matching cups in it. "Uh – what?"

"Coffee, you know," they say, turning away to put the cup holder down carefully. "It's five in the morning. I don't know about you, but I don't function normally at five in the morning." When they look back, they've got a crooked, teasing smile. "Do you?"

Tommy is speechless for a moment, then mentally shakes himself. *Grace and poise*, his coach's voice demands in his head, *don't show that you're rattled, don't give them an in. There are no friends in this sport.*

"I woke up at three thirty," Tommy reports. Olive's eyes widen. "I also don't drink coffee."

"Oh." They say. There's a beat of silence, and Tommy mourns whatever friendship could have been. It's an odd mix of emotions to have – apprehension, and unwarranted dislike, and a strong hatred for himself and the way that he destroys things before they begin. He *is* the way that his coach made him, and he'll never be free of that.

But, to Tommy's surprise, Olive smiles. "Well that's alright, I think we can still get along." They lean in, dropping their voice to a whisper. "Here's a secret: I like tea too. Maybe even *more* than coffee."

Tommy pauses. The bad feelings clear away. He takes a deep breath. "I think we can still get along too," he says, and thinks *if this is who will replace me, then I'll make sure they're good enough for Eret. I'm Tommy.*"

Olive reaches across the barrier and shakes his cold hand.

When Eret comes in, they're both already on the ice and just absently skating around. Tommy tries not to watch the way that he beams when he sees the coffee, and tries not to over-analyze the look that he gives Olive versus the look he gives Tommy, but –

"Are you two already warmed up?" Eret asks, shucking his coat. "Because I think today we're gonna take it a bit easy – get to know each other a little bit. Have some fun."

Tommy, tense, doesn't know if he'll be *able* to have fun. For Eret, he'll try. Maybe if he tries hard enough, Eret will keep him.

Olive doesn't seem concerned at all – all loose and already pink-cheeked from the cold. Tommy wonders how it feels to never be worried that you'll be unworthy to someone.

"Okay, here's what we're gonna do," Eret starts, "I'll say a jump, then ask a question and then each of us has to do the jump before answering said question. So, for example, if I said single Schlow and asked what everyone's favorite animal is ..."

Tommy doesn't move, mainly because he wasn't told to – something that Eret always says they'll keep working on – but Olive seems to hear that silent cue, and starts moving,

completing a single schlow with a graceful ease.

"Cats," they say, coming to a slow stop, tucking one foot behind their other like a ballerina. Eret grins, proud.

"Nice!" He turns, and *also* does the jump, and goes, "ferrets!" Then he comes to a stop, and suddenly they're *both* looking at Tommy, waiting.

Tommy tries to think *quick*. He's not settled on a favorite animal yet. Not really. He likes hamsters, and cats, and loves seeing snatches of bright red cardinal wings in the morning. He thinks tigers are cool and loves listening to Sapnap talk about elephants, and then listening to Quackity talk about fish. He loves Techno's two dogs, Apollo and Steve, and Eryn's dog, Izzy, and Niki's dog, Zuko.

Dogs, he thinks. *But – is that good enough?*

"Tommy?" Eret frowns, worried. "Do you understand the game? Should I explain it in a different way?"

"No," Tommy blurts, chest squeezing. "No, I can just – uh –" he moves, taking it one step at a time, just a single schlow, and then pausing only one second before just saying whatever comes to mind. "Swans."

He winces the moment it leaves his mouth.

"Swans?" Eret says. He seems confused. Troubled.

"I think swans are pretty neat!" Olive says when Tommy doesn't speak. "There was a pond by my school and one time we had a lot of swans come *into* the school from the water. It was crazy!"

Eret's look doesn't let up. Tommy knows why. His coach's favorite animals were swans. It was just – it was the first thing that came to mind. It was the only animal he could think of. His coach's favorite before his own.

Sorry, he thinks desperately, *sorry for being a disappointment*.

"Swans are...neat," Eret says slowly, passing a smile over to Olive. "Yeah. Here, why don't you go, Olive."

Their eyes flicker over to Tommy, uncertain, before their jaw sets. A gleam of challenge shines in their eyes. "Fondest memory," they say, "and a double axel."

"Oo," Eret hums, "a little more challenging."

Of course, Olive's jump is perfect – perfect posture, arms over the head, even their long braided hair doesn't bother them. Slightly breathless, they go, "getting my first pair of skates! I got them on Halloween."

"Your family gives presents on Halloween?"

Olive nods, "yes! And we eat pumpkin pie! Who says holidays have to be traditional?"

"Every Valentine's day I set off sparklers," Eret laughs, "I am the *last* person you need to explain breaking tradition to."

Tommy wilts. He doesn't have any non-traditional holiday celebrations. He doesn't have any *traditional* holiday celebrations. He remembered his last Christmas party – his parents hosted and Tommy had extended family visit and he and Erynn stayed up in his room watching shitty movies and comparing each other to the CGI reindeer. The memory feels so old that it tints at the edges. He can't remember what presents he got, what color the lights on the tree were, what desserts his parents laid out on the counter. He doesn't remember whether it *snowed*. How could he not know whether or not it *snowed*?

Eret does the double axel, then says, clearly and confidently, in all the ways that Tommy will never be, "my fondest memory is the weekend after my first Olympics. It was a very, very stressful event, and my friends Sam and Puffy dragged me in and we just *hung out* doing absolutely *nothing* for two days. It was bliss. What about you, Tommy?"

Tommy inhales sharply. He, prompted, immediately does as he's told, but when he has to talk about his fondest memory, he blanks.

Of course, there are some that immediately come to mind: sitting at the bottom of a snow tubing hill with Tubbo and Ranboo, laying lax in a large bed surrounding by hockey players, sitting in the front seat of Phil's car as they drive to his house for the first time in *months*.

But the one that sticks out the most is that first breakfast after his transfer. *Team breakfast*, Eret had said, and Tommy, who had heard of the magic of team meals from Wilbur, was buzzing with excitement and nerves to get on the road. It was just the two of them over breakfast foods Tommy hadn't been allowed in a long, long while, and Tommy vividly remembers wanting to laugh when strawberry jelly got smeared over Eret's chin. He wanted to laugh at his coach, and so he did, and all Eret did was *smile*.

That doesn't seem special enough. Nothing like first skates on Halloween or a sleepover after a gold medal. Sharing a laugh can't be his fondest memory.

"Winning gold," Tommy says, his voice sounds the way he does in interviews – detached and cold and ...dead. He doesn't mean it to be, but this is a question, a test, and Tommy desperately, *desperately* wants to pass.

Never look like you want it, his coach said, *we don't want to let people see the weakness in you*.

"That's my fondest memory," he finishes, and Olive raises their eyebrows slightly, a bit impressed, a bit put off. *Good*, Tommy thinks, *don't come close. There are no friends in this sport*.

Eret still seems unhappy with him, and Tommy, panic building up inside of him, blurts, "new question – favorite skate move. Mine is the quad lutz."

And really, Tommy doesn't know what he's doing anymore, but he feels as if he's grasping at straws, trying desperately to get Eret to smile at him, to do that twinkling laugh that makes Tommy feel like balloons of warmth are rising in him, to shake his head all fond and gentle and make Tommy feel *loved*. Tommy needs to feel loved, and he needs Eret to do the loving, because honestly – if he isn't good enough for his coach, then what is he?

Eret isn't smiling though. In fact, he's opening his mouth like he wants to protest, which makes sense as Tommy's *told him* before that the hydroblade was his favorite, but Tommy is turning around and skating the length of the rink before he can.

He builds up speed, letting the familiar feeling of the cold wind nip his cheeks, not letting the weird hitch in his chest stop him. He reaches backwards, bending deep in the knee and jumping up – up, up, up – enough to close his arms around his chest and squeeze and spin four times. It feels like there's no air this high, but it doesn't matter, Tommy's going too quick to breathe anyway. The first rule they teach you is not to listen to your body's limits – Tommy can skate dead if he has to.

When he lands, it hurts, but he pretends not to feel it. Just like he pretends that he doesn't almost fall from how deep he goes down. That doesn't matter. What matters is that his other skate didn't touch the ice – very nearly scraped it, and in judgment he knows his grade of execution would be debated, but it was a completed jump. It was a competition worthy jump. Tommy is competition worthy.

Tommy should be loved now.

He skids to a stop, keeping his chest from heaving too wildly. It burns badly, but he still lifts his chin like it doesn't.

Please. Give me just a twitch of approval. It'll last me days.

"That was...magnificent," Eret says slowly, and Tommy wants to whine. The furrow in his brow, the confusion, the *worry* – Tommy isn't someone that needs worrying over. Tommy can do quads on a whim. Tommy can throw himself into the air like the landing will never come. Tommy can win gold after gold after gold.

If Eret doesn't want that, then *what does he want?* If Eret doesn't want that, then *why does he want Tommy?*

...does he want Tommy?

"Olive," he says, eyes still flickering to Tommy worriedly. Tommy, barely breathing, barely anything, feels wooden. "Olive, you don't have to do a quad lutz if –"

Olive's eyes widen, lighting like fire. "Oh no, I want to. I want to try. Can I?"

"Have you done a quad before?"

Olive shakes their head, but their enthusiasm doesn't dip in the slightest. "My speciality is spins – those are my favorite, specifically illusion spins. I like how hard it is to make them

not look just like failed camels, but their own cool thing. But I can jump too! Hold on let me –"

They poke their tongue out between their teeth and skate off. For a moment, it looks like they've got it – their speed, their fearless, smooth launch into the sky. Their technique, Tommy has to say, is impeccable. Tommy's been trained to appreciate a skater with solid fundamentals, he knows that the constant reps needed to get there are no joke. All in all, the jump should be perfect.

Except, when Olive comes down, they waver. Except, when they land, they shake. Except when they're supposed to glide easily out of the jump, they tilt as if their entire center of gravity has been shredded, and then they go down.

"Olive!" Eret yelps, scrambling over, his usual grace forgotten. Tommy stands still, frozen. "Olive, are you –" He goes down to his knees just as Olive is trying to pick themselves up. They have one hand braced against the ice, and the other pressed to their forehead, but Eret gently pushes them back down. "No, no, don't get up yet. Just – wait a second."

Oh no, Tommy thinks. Oh no. I did this. This is my fault.

"Hold on," Eret is saying. "Just – get your bearings for a moment, alright? There's no rush."

Olive mumbles something, and Eret nods, then, without looking in Tommy's direction, says, "Tom, can you get Olive's bag by the bleachers?"

Tommy unfreezes. He gets the green bag, ignoring his shaking hands, and totes it over. Olive isn't injured in any way that he can see, but Eret still frets like they are, and Olive's hands are slow as they help unzip the bag.

"I'm alright," they're saying, "I'm okay, I promise." But they're clearly not, not with the way they're blinking like they just woke up from a long nap. *Concussion?* Tommy worries, *did they hit their head?* He wants to crowd closer, help Eret check them out, apologize profusely for being the person he wished he'd never be, but Eret shifts, blocking Tommy's view. Whether on purpose or by accident, Tommy doesn't know.

"Practice is canceled," Eret says without looking behind him. His voice is tight. Tommy can't tell if it's anger or concern. "We should clear the ice."

Tommy skates backwards, dread making him feel distant. He leaves Eret and Olive there in a huddle on the ice. The one thing that he *does* know for certain is when he isn't wanted.

"Why are you lingering around in my doorway?"

Tommy, who had been debating whether or not it was okay to knock for the past three minutes, flinches. His coach doesn't bother soothing him, instead raising his eyebrow and waiting.

"I just –" Tommy lowers his gaze. "Can I sit?"

"You want to sit." He says, tone unamused. Tommy wants to disappear. "All of this free time that I give you, and you want to use it to sit here still spending mine. That's very selfish of you, snowflake."

"Sorry," Tommy whispers, stepping backwards. "Sorry, I didn't mean to overstep, I just wanted—"

"What? What did you want?"

Tommy's shoulders pull in. "Company," he says, voice trembling. "I was lonely."

"Do you hear yourself?" His coach asks. "You were lonely," he goes, saying the word like it's not a real feeling. Tommy very suddenly wishes he just stayed downstairs in the lobby watching the people bustle in and out of the hotel. Maybe he wasn't lonely, maybe— maybe his coach is right. Maybe Tommy is just needy. Maybe he's just never satisfied. "Tommy, please, I'm trying to finish this work – work that will help you tomorrow when we go to the rink. I'm doing this for you. Can you not entertain yourself for an hour while I finish?"

Tommy's breathing stutters. "Yes sir, sorry sir. Thank you."

He doesn't quite know what he's saying thank you for, but it always seems to ease his coach's disposition, so he does it. Of course, the man doesn't acknowledge it – he's busy – so Tommy melts back through the doorway, and heads back downstairs to people-watch.

Take this practice off, Eret texts, Olive and I are just gonna talk, okay?

Tommy blinks at the words on the screen for a solid five minutes before they process. It's starting, he thinks miserably, curling in on himself, letting his screen go dark. It's starting. Tommy will be nudged back gently until he's watching from the outside, wishing for any scrap of love he can get.

Please rest, Eret texts. Relax. We can talk later.

Tommy doesn't rest. Tommy wonders how he can win. He spends an hour laying there, staring up at his ceiling, working through it all in his head. Where did it all start to go wrong? What is Tommy doing that isn't good enough? What changed?

Eret's rules are these: *tell me when you're hurt or sick or unwell. Tell me if you are skating impaired in any way. Tell me if I am making you uncomfortable or telling you to do something that you feel you're unable to. Tell me when you want to do something. Tell me when you need something. Tell me, tell me, tell me.*

But Tommy can't tell him this. Tommy can't tell him, *please keep me, please let me stay, please let me be yours.* Tommy can't be needy. Tommy can't linger in doorways where he isn't wanted.

Tommy rolls over, a sob rushing through him and breaking through. He presses his face into his pillow and shakes. This, Eret's love, is the best thing that's happened to Tommy in a long

time. He can't just let it go.

Tell me, Eret says, tell me. I'm here and I'll listen. Just tell me.

Tommy sits up and swipes his hand across his face. He sniffles. *I can tell him. Just this once, I can be needy. For the chance of keeping Eret, I will.*

When Tommy gets to the rink, he feels naked.

He doesn't have his skates, or his bag, or the clothes that he should be practicing in. All he's got is Wilbur's SMP sweatshirt with the frayed sleeve edges and red-rimmed eyes. Eret doesn't like having important conversations on the ice. He believes that anything like that should be separated from practice, because their feelings deserve each other's undivided attention.

But weirdly, Eret isn't there. It's just Olive, out on the ice, absently twirling and humming to themselves as they trace patterns with their blades.

"Olive?" Tommy calls.

Olive looks up, eyes widening. They smile and wave. "Tommy! Hey, what are you doing here?"

"It's our skating rink," Tommy says shortly. And then, internally, he wants to shake himself because the last time he *saw* Olive, they were easing into Eret's hands, in pain from a fall that *he* caused. How could he be so terrible? Why is he just like –

Oh God, why is he just like his coach?

"Well," Olive skates over to the edge, "Eret had something to go do, so he left me with the keys to skate a bit as long as I closed up after." They pause. "Did you bring your skates? You seem–"

"I seem what?"

Olive hesitates. "You seem on *edge*, Tommy."

Tommy blinks. "What?"

"Listen, Tommy," Olive starts, tracing a finger along the rink edge absently, "I wanted to say something the other day, but there was a lot going on, so I couldn't, but – I just want to apologize if I'm stepping on your toes here."

Tommy blinks again. "What?"

Olive shrugs slightly, looking down. "I'm new, I know that. I'm new and Eret is your coach and you don't know me, so I – I don't know, I just wanted to say that it's *okay* if you're not... with it for a while. I'm not afraid to stick it out. I can be the new kid for a little if I have to. Just let me know when and where I'm intruding and I'll back off."

Tommy stares.

Just let me know when and where I'm intruding and I'll back off.

Why are you lingering around in my doorway?

Oh God. Oh God.

Tommy, without knowing it, was turning into his coach the whole time.

Olive has been nothing but nice and kind and flexible to Tommy and Tommy's needs, and Tommy has just been *cold*. He's been dismissive and quiet and *angry*. He's been so, so mean.

He's a *terrible* person.

That's the realization that crumbles him. All of a sudden, he can't take a full breath. He can't get enough air.

"Tommy?" Olive goes, and Tommy wheezes, his lungs spasming, mouth opening and closing and silently *begging* for air. "Tommy?"

Tommy's vision flickers and blurs through tears. He hears the sound of quick skates on ice and the gate door banging, and then he's being lowered down to the ground carefully. He vaguely feels a hand brush his back and then another push at his shoulder, pushing him back so his head is on the floor.

Please, he wants to say, please help, Olive, help –

They seem to hear Tommy's silent need, because they help bring Tommy's arms over his head. "Here," They're saying, their voice panicked, "here, this should– uh – oh God, I think this opens up your chest. Please breathe, Tommy. Please. We – do you have an inhaler?"

Tommy whimpers, squeezing his eyes shut. He doesn't. He's never had one, because no one knew he had asthma. *He* didn't know he had it. He isn't supposed to *need* things like that. He's supposed to be perfect. Unmarred. Pristine.

"Okay," Olive says, more firm now, "alright, Tom, just – here, we're going to be calm, okay? We're going to sit and be calm and not freak out. Let's just sit together, yeah?"

Tommy, wheezing, fumbles for Olive's hand, which is still splayed over his heart. Olive hums, not even wincing when he squeezes the life out of it.

"Breathe," they say, and Tommy inhales through stutters. "Come on, Simons. *Come on. Do not stop breathing.*"

Unfortunately, all Tommy can get in his lungs is biting cold air, and it makes him shudder even more.

"Wh – oh no, oh no, oh –" Olive fumbles for something. "I'm calling for help, Tommy, please, just– just hold on. Just hold on."

Tommy wheezes painfully, tears stinging at the corners of his eyes. Olive's hand on his chest doesn't move even as they talk frantically into the phone, clearly panicking just as much as Tommy. Tommy is grateful just as equally as he is horrified – Olive is nice no matter how awful Tommy is. He doesn't deserve this hand, but he appreciates it all the same.

His vision begins to blur as the rink doors open and Olive waves them over, speaking, saying *something*, but Tommy can't understand them. His vision is darkening and his chest, which was burning, is now loosening.

Get up Simons, he thinks, you always get up.

Tommy doesn't get up.

"Again," Tommy's coach says, and Tommy, aching and hurting and out of breath, spins into his starting position. He waits just a beat, then imagines the music and lets his body pull him through the choreography. He looks up, then down, then turns like he's chasing after a butterfly, like there's something out of reach and he desperately needs it.

"Use your eyes," his coach reprimands. "You're acting like you've never skated in your life. This is where you have to convince people to care about you – if you can't do it here..."

His coach trails off, but the implication is enough to make emotion well up in him. Desperation and need fight in him, and by the end of his routine, his vision is blurry and his chest feels as if there's a metal band welded around it, but he's proud of the way not a single tear falls.

"Hm," his coach goes. He crosses his arms over his chest. "Do you think you deserve a water break?"

Tommy shakes. No - please, he thinks, just let me – don't make me answer. Just let me off the ice. Just for a second.

"Do you?" He asks again. "Speak."

Tommy's mouth opens. "No," he says. Because that's always the right answer, isn't it? No, I shouldn't have a water break. No, I shouldn't leave the rink even if you are. No, I shouldn't rest, ever, for any reason. I should work, and work, and work, because it's what you deserve for doing so much for me.

His coach gives an approving nod, and Tommy, for more reasons than one, wishes his legs would give out under him. They don't – they never do, and so Tommy, trembling and thirsty and completely out of breath, turns and goes back to his starting position.

Tommy wakes up in the hospital with a fuzzy head.

His first thought is *ugh*, and his second thought is *oh God, Olive*.

There's the sound of soft snoring coming from the chair next to him, and when he turns his neck slightly he can see Olive laying there, neck bent in a way that looks painful, their hair in tangles. They look exhausted, even as they rest. *And stressed*, Tommy notes, feeling guilty. He didn't mean for all of this to happen.

He reaches out slowly and brushes their fingers, when they touch, Olive jerks awake.

"Tommy?" they go, blinking, sitting up. They wince, rolling their neck, and then stand, hands fluttering. "Oh my god, Tommy? You're awake! You're- you're *okay*. Oh my god, you're okay."

They must have put an oxygen mask over Tommy's mouth to keep him breathing as he was unconscious, because it's still there, stopping him from responding verbally. He blinks at Olive and nods. He's breathing, if that's what they mean. Okay seems like a stretch, but he's certainly breathing.

Olive laughs a little, high and stressed. "Oh thank god," they say. And then they burst into tears.

Tommy startles, so surprised that he can do nothing but stare as they press their hands to their face to try and taper the tears before they fall.

"I thought– oh God, I thought I *killed you*," they say, voice wavering and shaking. "I thought you – and I didn't know what to do, and so I called for an ambulance but – oh, then they tried to keep me out, and wouldn't let me see you, so I had to lie and say we were siblings, which we obviously *aren't*, and they were looking at me like I was *crazy*, and, oh my god."

Oh, Tommy thinks. Oh no. He doesn't know what to do. He doesn't have much experience helping people who are crying – especially not if he can't speak.

He did it once for Ranboo. Found the boy sitting downstairs in a hotel lobby when he was visiting them for a board competition, and was panicked to see the tracks of tears on his cheeks glinting in the moonlight. He's not good with words, having had his own stolen from him too many times to be confident anymore, but he sat next to Ranboo and curled a hesitant hand against his elbow.

Tommy just held on, and eventually Ranboo tilted closer, leaning against him. It seemed to help, because the next morning, Ranboo smiled at his gratefully over their waffles.

Tommy remembers earlier, and how even when he was panicking and unable to get any air, even when his fear was blinding and his body was failing him, having Olive press that firm hand to his chest helped clear his head. Just a little. Sometimes, just a little is all that's needed.

Tommy fumbles a little, pulling himself to sit up. He hesitates a beat before reaching out and carefully curling his hands around Olive's wrists. He pulls them away from their face and then puts a hand over their heart.

Calm, he thinks, Breathe.

Olive blinks their wet, red eyes at him. Then, slowly, they put their own hand over Tommy's, taking a deep breath.

"Oh," they go. Tommy smiles – small, but still. Olive takes another deep breath, and Tommy does too. "Oh, okay. Okay, alright."

Tommy nods, then slowly pulls away. Olive lets him go.

"Thank you," they say, settling. They swipe their cheeks clean of tears. "I should – I should get a nurse. Just to make sure you're really okay."

Tommy nods again, watching them carefully.

"Don't go anywhere," they say sternly before they leave the room. Tommy, marginally delirious, bites back a laugh.

"I called Eret," Olive says later when the nurse is finished checking Tommy out and deems him okay enough to sit up and take the mask off. "He's still on his way – he was halfway down to visiting family when I called, so he'll be here in thirty or so."

Tommy resists the urge to wince. There he goes, wasting people's time again. Olive, Eret. Who's next?

Then Olive asks a question that Tommy doesn't know the answer to:

"Tommy," they say, "why didn't you say you had asthma?"

Immediately, Tommy thinks – *because I can't. I'm not allowed. I can do quads on a whim. I can throw himself into the air like the landing will never come. I can win gold after gold after gold.*

No one's ever said he was allowed to have asthma.

It wasn't spoken like all the other rules, but again, for every spoken rule there were twenty more unspoken ones. No water breaks unless they're earned, no leaving the rink even if his coach is, no rest *ever* for any reason.

And of course, always, *always* get back up, because if he doesn't then he's wasting everyone's time. And a waste is the worst thing to be.

Tommy shakes his head. He can't say all of that. "I don't," is what he settles on, and Olive seems to understand.

"Okay, but you do, Tommy. You do. My mother used to own a hair salon, and she got asthma from the chemicals. Even now, when she's stressed, she'll still have this really tight wheezing breathing when she's getting close to accidentally triggering an attack. You had that, I just – I didn't notice."

"It's not your fault," Tommy frowns.

Olive sighs. "I know, I know. I just – I wish you weren't in the hospital right now. This sucks."

A thought that Tommy didn't want to entertain comes fluttering up to the front of his brain. "Is Eret..." Tommy licks his lips, "Is Eret...mad?"

Olive's brows furrow. Then, a look passes over their face – fierce and dark. "No," they say, voice still kind, "no, but – Tommy, he wouldn't be. I've heard about ...about your old coach. how he acted. Some of what he did. Tommy, Eret is your coach now. He would never do that to you."

"I know," Tommy says. Because he *does*. "I know that. I guess I just – I got scared."

"Scared of what?"

"I'm replaceable," Tommy says quietly. Mournfully. "I'm broken. Especially now. I can't even breathe right. How would he want me when you're perfectly fine?"

Olive, weirdly, laughs. Sharp and bright and all of a sudden like it surprised even them.

"Tommy," they giggle, "Tommy, dude, no - perfectly fine? Tommy, I'm anemic. No, no, my blood is like, *missing*. It's kinda funny, honestly."

"What?"

"Well, when I went up for that quad, it was like, the world's biggest head rush all at once. I can *land it*," they say, poking at Tommy's arm, all friendly competition, "but without a proper warm up...well, I end up face down, eating ice."

Then they tilt their head like they're curious. "Do you think *I'm* broken because of that?"

Horribly, a voice in his head that sounds like his coach, says, *yes, you will never win like this. You will always have this set back. You will go nowhere because of this.*

But, Tommy makes himself think. Olive has a bright fire, Olive skates with a love, Olive's favorite spin is the most challenging one to make look nice. Olive took Tommy's test with no fear whatsoever. That's all any figure skater needs to be successful. A blinding love and a raging courage. Who cares what you're missing if you have that?

I am not my coach, he thinks. He wills. *I am me.*

"No," Tommy says finally. "No. I don't think you're broken."

Olive beams. "Well, then how could *you* be broken?"

A tension that Tommy didn't even know he was carrying leaves him all of a sudden. He isn't broken because of this. Olive is like him, and when Olive went down, Eret simply followed, worried. Eret just asked, a little bit more concerned than usual, if Olive was sure they could jump. And when they said *yes*, Eret let them go. Tommy isn't broken because of this, and Eret won't treat him like he is.

"Oh," he says, laughing slightly. "Oh good, oh." Tears well up in his eyes and he's embarrassed, but Olive merely smiles. "So Eret won't transfer me away?"

"Tommy, you're crazy if you think he ever would. Half of our meeting was just us talking about you. He was worried that you weren't taking it all well, and was asking me if you said anything."

"I wasn't taking it well," Tommy admits.

"I know."

"I didn't want you here."

"I know."

"I want you here now."

"I kn—" Olive blinks. "What?"

"I want you to skate with me. Under Eret." Tommy says, ears burning. "I want...I want us to be friends."

"Really?" Olive goes. "Oh, but what about the – *there are no friends in this sport, I'm gold medalist Tom Simons and I'm going to skate all over you grr grr–*"

Tommy laughs, pressing a hand over his mouth to stifle the sound. Olive's eyes gleam. "No," he says when he's calmed down. "No, that was ...someone else. I'm not gonna be like them."

"Good," Olive smiles. "Does this mean I get to find out what your *actual* favorite animal is?"

"Dogs," Tommy says instantly. "Sorry for lying."

Olive shakes their head. "No, don't be. A coffee drinker and a tea drinker, a cat lover and a dog lover. Gosh, we have our work cut out for us, huh?"

Tommy smiles. "I can like a cat, if you can drink a cup of tea."

"I *can* drink a cup of tea," Olive nods. "Oh my gosh, we're gonna make this work."

"We're gonna make this work," Tommy repeats, and means it.

Eret comes in ten minutes later, his hair a mess, and his coat rumpled. He's panicked and rushing so badly that he very nearly knocks over the nurse who just got Tommy some warm water for his throat. Tommy is suddenly very grateful that Olive just left the room, because he imagines this will be a *conversation* moment, and those are already hard enough to have with just the two of them.

"Tommy," Eret exclaims, chest heaving, "Tommy, you're–"

"I'm okay," he says sheepishly. Eret takes one huge breath, then reaches forward, bundling Tommy into a hug. Tommy stiffens, then slowly eases like water in his hold. He presses his face into the crook of Eret's shoulder and just breathes.

He knows that something silent in his grip is begging *don't let go, please*, because Eret simply shifts to sitting at the end of Tommy's bed so he doesn't have to let go.

"We should talk," he says over Tommy's head, and Tommy hums, letting his eyes shut. He just wants to sit here with Eret's arms around him for now. He just wants to rest. He's been missing this. "What's been going on, Tommy? And please don't tell me that it's nothing, because you've been upset. I know you've been upset."

Tommy sighs softly, and squeezes one last time, relishing the safety he feels there before pulling away. "I have been upset," he says slowly. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you."

"Did I make you feel unsafe?"

Tommy squirms a little. This is hard. His coach never did this. Never asked Tommy to tell him where he went wrong. He feels like shouldn't say anything to Eret, it feels ungrateful and selfish – but he can't deny that it feels *nice* to not have all the blame all the time. It feels nice to be the one who was wronged and have that acknowledged.

"I just – I felt insecure." Tommy whispers. "I thought when you said you wanted to coach Olive, that you didn't want to coach me. That you were replacing me."

Eret's eyes widen. He looks horrified. In all honesty, that's more than enough to mollify Tommy, but Eret shakes his head too. "No, Tommy, no. That's – no, I wanted you to have the chance to have a friend in practice. We can't always get Eryn or Aimsey or Beau to practice with us, but when we do you're so happy. You laugh so much. I wanted *that* for you. I wanted your happiness, Tommy. That's all I want. Ever."

"Oh." Tommy feels embarrassed. "Oh, I thought – oh."

"Is that why you were...acting differently three days ago?"

Tommy nods, flushed red. "I wanted you to keep me, so I– well, I did things that I thought would make me liked."

Eret frowns. "I like *you* as *you*, Tommy. You like the color red and long drives and old rock and going to the zoo. You don't get sick easily, but when you do it hits you hard. You don't swear, not because you can't, but because it would upset your mom. You love the water but are scared of the beach. Tommy, your favorite skating move is the *hydroblade*, not a quad *whatever*. *I know you*. And I love that I know you. I don't want you to change. Especially not because you think it will make me happy."

"Really?"

"Really really," Eret says.

Tommy sighs, pressing his palms to his warm cheeks. "I got confused."

"And that's alright," Eret soothes. "But next time, tell me and I'll explain it. Please. I never want you to feel unwanted. Always, but especially not with me."

Tommy looks at his coach for a moment, then blurts, "my favorite memory. I said it was winning gold. It's not." Eret nods like he knows that. "My favorite memory is of us. Do you remember when we had our first team breakfast?"

"Of course, how could I forget?"

"I got to laugh at you. It was a nice day, and I was happy and we were together, and you had jelly on your face, and I got to laugh at you. And you weren't mad at all when I did. That's my fondest memory. I –" his voice quiets, as if he's afraid of being overheard, "I don't care about gold. Not really."

Eret doesn't mock him or ridicule him. If anything, Eret's face just gets softer. "Oh Tommy." He sighs. "I love you."

Tommy goes completely red. "You can't say that."

"I can't? I think I just did."

"No, you're –"

"I feel like I should be allowed to tell my student that I appreciate him, and love him, and am very very fond of him." Eret lists off, speaking like he's breathing, like it's just so easy to love Tommy.

And Tommy wants to sink into it, because this is what he's been needing to hear for a while now, but he can't. He can't. Guilt is opening up inside of him like a pit, swallowing all of the good feelings that Eret was giving.

"I have asthma," Tommy says suddenly. He knows what Olive *said*, but he needs to hear it with his own ears. He can't just assume. *Tell me*, is Eret's policy, and Tommy's broken it enough already. If Eret doesn't know that he's saying I love you to an athlete that might falter just shy of a gold, Tommy doesn't know what he'll do.

"I know," Eret says, his happiness dimmed a little. "The doctor told me when I practically accosted her in the hall. She told me everything, and Tommy, you have to know that this doesn't change anything between us, yeah? Just like Olive coming on doesn't. You are forever going to be my skater. Forever. At least until you don't want me anymore. I couldn't not want you."

"I wouldn't," Tommy admits. "You're my coach."

Eret smiles. "Good. Now I hope you know I will be hounding you about taking care of yourself. If you thought I was bad before, I will just get worse. I have to watch out for you and Olive. That's the promise I made when I became your coach, and I'm going to stick to it."

Tommy sighs happily, then leans forward to tap their foreheads together. "That sounds nice."

A knock sounds at the door and Olive pokes their head in, drinks in their hands. "Hello," they call, "I have teas for the emotional talk— if it's still happening."

Eret pulls away. "Come in Olive," he laughs.

"Tommy," they say, nudging the door open with their hip and showing off the drinks, "I had to save you, I think they're just going to feed you ice chips and warm water the whole time you're here. I didn't know which you were in the mood for, so don't worry, I got three different kinds – there's camomile with honey, hibiscus, and green with ginger."

"Camomile," Tommy picks, then pats next to him and Olive beams, coming over to sit on Tommy's other side. Tommy, a bit self-conscious, takes a breath. "Can we start over, Olive?" He sticks out his hand. "Hi, I'm Tommy. I'm really excited to skate with you. And I mean it this time. No tests."

Olive shakes his hand. "Hi, I'm Olive, I can't wait to skate *better* than you. And you know what? I liked your tests."

Tommy laughs, surprised. He notes that for the future. "Oh sure," he says flippantly, his smile cutting the aggression off the words. "Skate better than me - sure you will."

"Well," Eret says, eyes dancing in between the two of them, smile shining on them both equally. "I think this will go well."

"Olive," Tommy says, "there's jelly on your cheek."

Olive, who was busy explaining why French toast wasn't actually French, but it was called French toast because to french something meant *to slice* it, blinks.

"What?" They say. Eret, calmly buttering his toast, tries not to smile.

"You've got," Tommy motions to his own left cheekbone. "There's just – something."

"Here?" Olive goes, wrinkling their nose, crossing their eyes to look.

"No," Tommy stifles a giggle, "no, no, it's –"

"Here, Olive, here," Eret says, unhelpfully motioning to his own cheek. "Right here, but on you."

"Oh yeah, right there but on me, of course," Olive says, tilting their head like that would do anything at *all*.

Tommy's cheeks are red from holding in his laughter. He presses the back of his hand to his mouth, swelling with glee.

"Well see, Simons," Olive says, eyes squinting, "you've got something on *your* face too."

"They're right," Eret nods, "you're quite red."

"I'm –" Tommy shakes his head, "I'm not –"

"You *are*," Olive says. "You are. Very red. Like a strawberry. Like *jelly*."

Tommy breaks then, guffawing so terribly ugly, throwing his head back and shaking because they're both looking at him but *Olive still has jelly on their cheek*. Olive laughs when Tommy does, eyes squinting happily, and Eret, smiling so fond, takes out his phone and takes a photo of them.

"Hey!" Olive protests when he puts the phone down, "wait, let me at least get the *jelly off first* –"

Tommy, not at all embarrassed by his bright joy, leans back slightly, watching Olive attempt to swipe the phone from Eret. His coach would call them all classless and tell him to sit up and be quiet, but also, his coach wouldn't even *be* here to have breakfast with. His coach wouldn't have jelly with bread and smile at Tommy over orange juice. His coach wouldn't nudge his foot under the table when he's about to make a joke. His coach wouldn't be so gentle and careful and fun.

His coach, Tommy realizes, is not here. It's just Olive and Eret.

Tommy, happy and breathing easy, smiles and takes a bite of his toast.

End Notes

that was fun ^_^ I sure hope nothing bad happens to ice!olive in the future!

songs I listened to as I wrote this:

don't quite belong by dodie

growing pains by birdy

breathe by taylor swift + cobie caillat

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